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✓ Parks + Recreation (VC)

The great outdoors

County's wetland wildlife refuge opens today

By Dave Delaney
Tribune-Star Staff Reporter

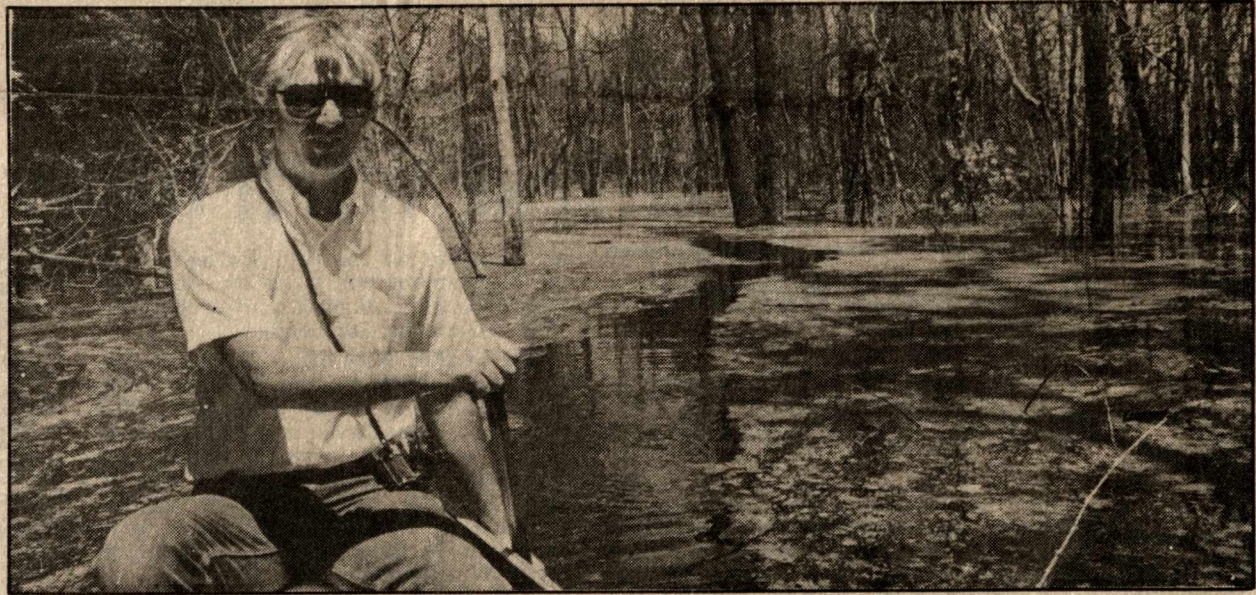
Keith Ruble gave a pull on his paddle and the water swirled in a circle behind the aluminum canoe.

"You'll find plenty of wildlife back here," the Vigo County Park and Recreation superintendent said as he guided his canoe through the flooded woods and bayous that make up 61-acre J.I. Case Wetland Wildlife Refuge. The refuge, adjoining Hawthorn Park a few miles east of Terre Haute, officially opens today.

Ruble estimates the complex is worth \$300,000, but the county only paid \$42,000. Digging the refuge gave Case a chance to use experimental backhoes and front end loaders.

He said the refuge is home to four different wood duck broods, two mallard duck broods, a pied billed grebe brood, Great Horned owls, Canadian geese, beavers, muskrats and plenty of good fishing for large-mouth bass.

Last year, 18,000 large-mouth



Tribune-Star/Dave Delaney

Paddling along: Keith Ruble canoes through 61-acre refuge adjoining Hawthorn Park.

bass were stocked in the wetlands, and thousands more hit the water the previous summer. Other fish in the many-fingered lake include blue gill and catfish. The lake is too

small to stock crappie.

Ruble said the refuge should attract both serious anglers and casual fishermen, who can either fish from the bank or from a boat

powered only by battery trolling motors. Boats can be launched by carrying them in. He said a launching area will be constructed later along with a large parking lot.

Community Affairs File

Vigo County Public Library

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(Above) The JI Case wetland in Vigo County was created through the combined efforts of local, state and federal agencies in cooperation with private industry and the local public. (Right) A hen wood duck and her ducklings make the wetland their home.

By Donald Buckland

In 1980, Vigo County purchased a 205-acre tract for inclusion in the county park system. The property already had a lake, but considerable renovation was necessary to upgrade it and create facilities to meet the standards of the Vigo County Park and Recreation Department. Plans for what-would-be-named Hawthorn Park included 75 modern campsites, modern restroom and shower buildings, picnic shelters, play areas, several miles of trails and an 18-acre lake. When completed, the park would be another first-class facility provided by Vigo County.

The story could have ended here, but not at Hawthorn Park. There was still another area of the park that needed planning and possible development. The property's eastern third normally stayed wet and provided very little recreation potential. Historically, the area had been farmed. But a crop was harvested only once every few years when the ground was frozen enough to support equipment.

Keith Ruble, superintendent of Vigo County Park and Recreation Department, discussed the possibilities for the area with board member Max Miller. Miller, a county extension agent with the Cooperative Extension Service in Vigo County, told Ruble that the area was



Wetlands By Design



probably too wet for conventional land uses and suggested consideration of a wetland area. Ruble thought the idea was excellent, but realized that the expense of such a project exceeded his budget.

Because of potential cost, the idea was temporarily dismissed but not forgotten. The idea was discussed with Ned Pennington, Vigo County district conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service. Pennington also thought the idea had merit if construction costs could be overcome.

In the fall of 1983, the dream started to become a reality. Representatives from the JI Case Company approached Pennington about possible locations to test

their new model 680 backhoes. The wetland project was resurrected and within a matter of hours, plans were being made to begin work on the wetland area.

Ruble received complete support from the Vigo County Park and Recreation Board and began moving full-speed ahead. A waterfowl management biologist from the Division of Fish and Wildlife assisted with the project's design and layout.

The result was a series of long, narrow, snake-like pits to benefit fish, mammals and waterfowl. The pits' configuration maximized the amount of shoreline increasing wildlife benefits and water-

fowl nesting opportunities. However, the most productive nesting areas were islands in the middle of each pit which were created by the dredged fill material being placed there by backhoes.

Each pit, although varying in length, is approximately 32 feet in width from island to each shore. Depth also varied but was an average 6 feet deep with some pools 16 feet deep. When JI Case backhoes pulled out in late fall, 5 acres of water in long narrow trenches had been created and Phase I of the wetland area was completed.

In 1984, JI Case returned to Hawthorn to test their front-wheel loaders. Plans for Phase II consisted of constructing almost

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a mile of levy which would require moving about 30,000 cubic yards of earth. When completed, the levy would contain a 61-acre marsh including the earlier 5 acres of pits. The water level would remain low enough to maintain the islands in the middle of the pits and continue to provide dry, nesting sites for visiting waterfowl. Other nesting islands would also be constructed in the main wetland.

Before construction and inundation, several steps had to be accomplished. A permit had to be obtained from the Division of Water. Even though the wetland was specifically designed for wildlife and waterfowl, it would provide flood protection from the surrounding watershed.

Texas Gas Company had an underground pipeline beneath the proposed wetland. When the project was discussed with them, they volunteered to remove the old line and replace it with new line complete with weights to prevent the line from floating after the wetland was flooded. This project donation was \$70,000. Public Service Indiana also contributed significantly to the project. PSI allowed construction beneath a high-voltage transmission line and donated part of the acreage from an adjacent substation to be used for wildlife plantings.

The increased water table resulting from the levy would eventually kill the area's trees and the decision was made to use some of them.

Nearly 40,000 board feet of low-grade timber was harvested from the area prior to flooding.

However, there were plenty of trees left to provide cover for wildlife using the wetland.

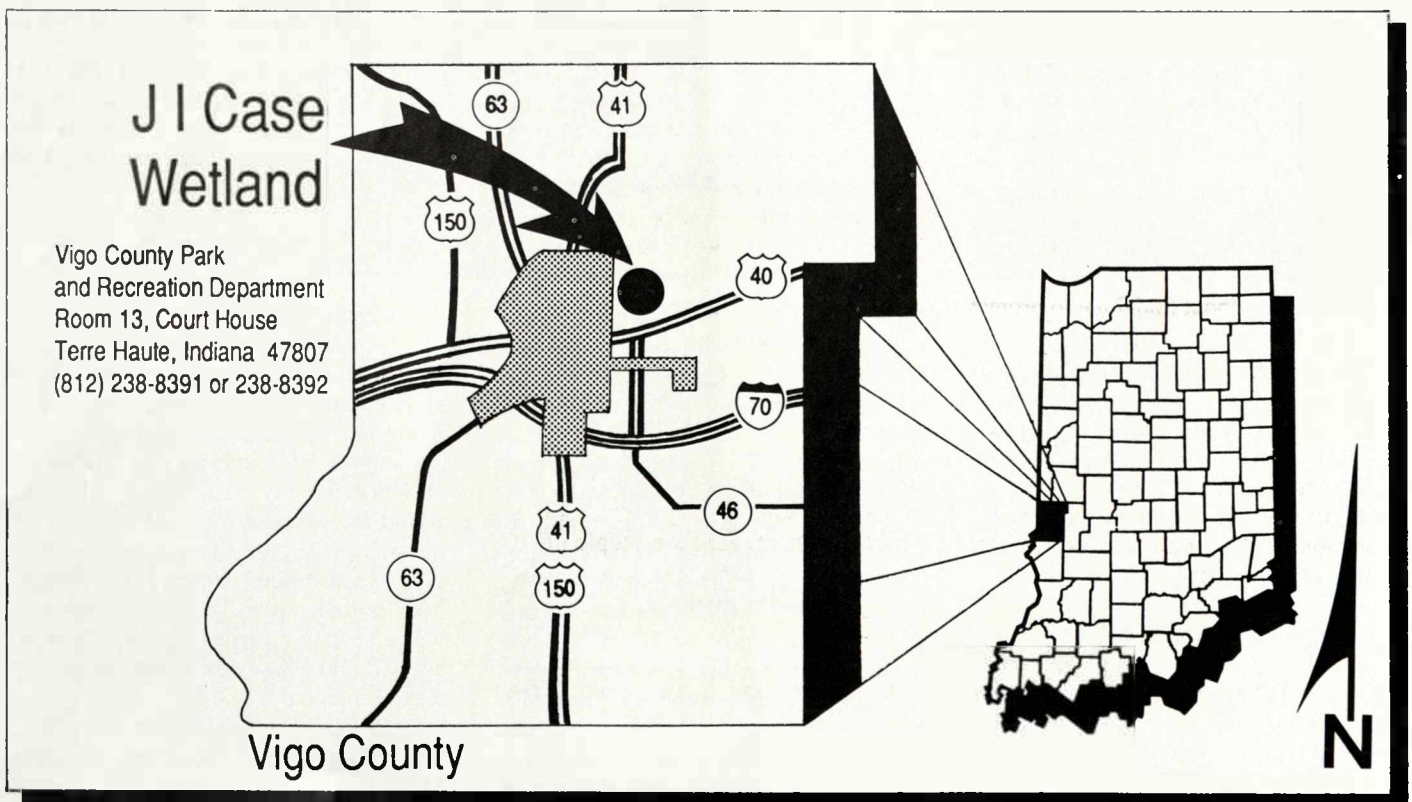
With all the preliminaries completed, JI Case began levy construction with their front-end loaders in the fall of 1984. Bad weather forced them to quit before construction was completed.

It is estimated that JI Case contributed \$250,000 of service to the wetland area in the two years that they worked on the project. The Vigo County Park and Recreation Department realized that without JI Case's assistance, the wetland would not have been possible. The department appropriately named the wetland area the JI Case Wildlife Area.

A bid was awarded to Dennis Contracting for \$35,000 to complete levy construction the following fall. Technical assistance was provided by the Vigo County Soil Conservation Service. By the spring of 1986, the 61-acre, shallow-water marsh had been created with winter runoff from the upstream watershed.

Steve Andrews, district fisheries biologist for the Division of Fish and Wildlife, surveyed the original pits in the summer of 1985. Bass and bluegill were already present, although there had been no official stocking. Apparently, some anglers had contributed to the fishing program. It was decided not to stock additional fish until the marsh was completed.

In the spring of 1986, 18,000 fingerling largemouth bass were stocked in the





Andrew Johnston

marsh. During the summer of 1986, excellent fishing was reported with good catches of bluegill. There was also a report of a 5-pound bass caught, apparently a product of the earlier pit stocking.

Anglers can bank fish at JI Case year-round. Boat traffic is not allowed from early spring to about mid-June to protect nesting waterfowl and broods from harassment. Persons interested in fishing the area during this time period should first check with the Vigo County Park and Recreation Department in Terre Haute. A launching ramp provides for easy access to the lake. A 14-inch largemouth bass limit and other state fishing regulations apply to those fishing the area.

Waterfowl use J I Case frequently, especially during the peak migration periods of fall and spring. During the last nesting season, Ruble reported observations of seven, wood duck broods, two mallard broods, one Canada goose brood

and a successful hatch of pied-billed grebes.

Future plans include the construction of an observation tower on the wetland area's west end and a floating boardwalk to enable more users to enjoy the wetland's beauty and diversity.

The JI Case Wetland Wildlife Area demonstrates the cooperative efforts of industry; federal, state and local agencies; and the local public in creating a unique county park. Other county park systems can learn and benefit from the example of the Vigo County Park and Recreation Department's innovative approach to high-quality recreation and wildlife habitat. And the people of Vigo County and Indiana can enjoy a unique wetland wildlife area.

Donald Buckland is the regional director of Quails Unlimited in Virginia. He was employed by the DNR for 11 years.

The Case backhoe is a familiar piece of equipment at many construction sites. JI Case contributed \$250,000 of service to the creation of the wetland area.